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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by KATHLEEN BLISS

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A DEBATE ON HOUSING in the House of Commons always engenders heat and acrimony. This is partly due to the personalities of the protagonists on each side of the House, but it is mainly due to the fact that this is the point upon which public opinion is most alive. If the Government cannot make good in this matter, its stock is in danger of a rapid fall.

NEWS-LETTER

Housing Questions

SUPPLEMENT

PLANNERS' PARADISE
—A NEW CHRISTIAN OPPORTUNITY

HOUSING PROGRESS

Mr. Bevan was able to produce in the debate on October 21st some figures which indicate that the provision of houses is going forward if not with a rush at least with increasing momentum. The main building is being done by contractors for local authorities. In the course of his speech, Mr. Bevan said: "At 31st March, sites for permanent houses in possession of local authorities amounted to 498,859. Site development had begin for 188,821; site development was completed for 103,248, and tenders approved for 71,078. By 31st August last, this figure had increased to 155,523 houses." Substantial progress has also been made in the building of temporary houses.

Behind all the noise in Parliament and the press and the figures hurled to and fro in criticism and defence of policy, lies one of the grimmest tragedies of our country at this time. The original spontaneous action of the squatters in taking possession of empty camps and commandeered but unused

blocks of flats had an element of sheer desperation in it. Mr. Leslie Hale gave a sombre picture of conditions in his own constituency. He said: "There are 2,350 back-to-back houses in Oldham. I have had to interview discharged soldiers about their pension cases, and I have had to walk up rickety wooden unsafe stairs to see them. I have walked into many a single bedroom that was the home of a man, his wife and family; a room in which they cooked, fed and lived, with no backyard and no front, and nowhere to play. . . . In Oldham we have 9,500 houses which have been scheduled for demolition out of our 40,000 houses in the town. When the Minister of Health faces that financial problem I ask him to realize that that is a burden which no town can bear. The Government must consider the question of the equalization of rates, to enable backward urban areas to consider this great problem."

SPEED AND FORESIGHT

These are terrible facts, and they have their equal in many other parts of the country. Children living in houses which are either insanitary or grossly overcrowded are growing up thwarted, discontented and cynical. The public has the right to expect from the Government speed before anything else. But speed is a bad criterion to apply to housing programmes. To-day's remedies, if they have lacked foresight, frequently become to-morrow's problems. What is being built now is the result of provision made during the last eighteen months. It cannot be altered. But what will be built in the coming years is being decided and planned to-day, and if it is going to be modified in execution, it has to be examined in planning.

The danger is that local authorities and even the public at large may become the victims of a single idea. "Twelve houses to the acre" was the dominating conception in the building of new housing estates between the wars. Perhaps we are being subtly lured now into the fascination of the clean sweep and the new beginning. We hear in every town of large areas scheduled for replanning. This leads to an unwillingness to spend money on existing houses and the argument "What's the use of putting baths in houses that

will be pulled down in ten or twenty years ? " forgets that a generation of children can grow up in that time. Those who hold the clean sweep approach to housing do not give sufficient weight to the fact that a good deal of so-called bad houses can be made better by seeing that fewer people live in them. The social solidarity and rootedness of old streets is a tremendous factor in human happiness, and at present many local authorities are far too ready to rip up whole communities by the roots, without considering the loss and the future troubles which that loss may bring. A letter from one of our readers who has served on the housing committee of more than one authority sounds a warning :—

" For the ' Old Cities ' my plea is really that we should not allow ourselves to be driven by all the convincing statistics of the County of London Plan, and others like it, into a programme of housing large proportions of the population in tall blocks of flats, unless with lively minds we think out in good time the personal and social effects which the barrack-like environment is going to create. I know that those who care about good design and layout of flat schemes would challenge the word ' barrack-like ', but I use it to indicate a danger which will not by any means always be avoided.

" After the first war we planned Becontree and Dagenham, to be an improvement on the East London slums ; and so they were. But the monotony, the lack of social centres, the rootlessness, the desire to get away to something more warm and human, were not foreseen, and now we condemn the men of that age for not foreseeing them.

" I can see no guarantee that in going ahead with a great extension of flat life we have really made sure that we have thought of everything, any more than our fathers who planned Becontree did. Probably somebody is thinking about these problems, though I do not know where. I am confident that the local authorities in the big cities which are driven into a flat programme are not thinking out all that is involved. Their hands are full with getting the flats built."

HUMAN LIVING IN FLAT DWELLINGS

The choice before all crowded cities is between rehousing people in the areas where they now live, or moving them

away. The former choice means a large proportion of flats, the latter means a longer journey to work. In the period between the wars the London County Council provided 82,300 new dwellings, of which 23,530 were flats. The new County of London Plan envisages a very steep increase in the number of flats. The argument rages unceasingly. Popular opinion comes down very heavily in favour of houses with yards or gardens, and the cost of land at the centre and of travel to the centre are forcing us more and more into the flat solution, both in London and in other great cities. Younger married couples move into flats with the idea that they are a temporary expedient. They live constantly hoping to move away: they put down no roots and are restless and discontented. For these reasons dwellers in large blocks of flats usually have no relationships with people in surrounding houses. They do not seem to belong to the place, tend to be politically irresponsible and, at least in continental experience, easy prey for political hysteria.

There is something unalterable and unremediable about a block of flats. It offers the minimum outlet for a man's own resource in adapting and improving his environment, and subjects him and his children to restrictions which are hard to bear. Most bitter of all is the loss of the private yard. One of the most remarkable features of all great cities is the great number of poultry clubs and still more of rabbit clubs. Even a few square yards of ground give a man the chance to hark back to his pre-city life, to tend an animal, to dig a yard of earth and plant a few seeds, to make a shed. These are not considerations thought out by sentimental idealists. They are the strong and scarcely articulate feelings of men and women who actually have to live in flats. How different they are in experience from the sunlit photographs, and the plans which fascinate us, a gadget-minded nation, by their resourceful economy and planning of space! [1]

AN EXPERIMENT IN COMMUNITY

It is an interesting reflection on human nature that the more people are thrust into close propinquity with each

[1] There are two useful small books—*Towns of the Future*, by Gladys Keable, S.C.M. Press, 2s. 6d., and *Tenement Town*, by L. E. White, describing the work of a pacifist service unit, Jason Press, 2s. 6d.

other, the less they like each other. Real community grows up where people have a sufficient independence to stand squarely on their own unassailed position and status, and from it to reach out to others. To turn a block of flats into a real community is an extremely difficult task and to see it being done a very remarkable experience.

Such a growth of community is at present taking place in blocks of flats housing 1,500 people in Kennington, South London. The story had its beginning some years before the war, when the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement bought an old public-house in a slum area and turned it into a club. The work was making good progress when notices were served on the local residents to leave, as the area was due for slum clearance. Most of the more independent spirits set to and found themselves other accommodation. The rest sat down and waited for the day to arrive. When it did they were drafted off to flats more than a mile away, which to London people is like being sent overseas. Soon there came rumours of difficulties among the flat dwellers and there was no one on the spot to whom they could take their troubles. To meet the problem the housing authority gave permission to one of the Settlement workers to live in one of the flats. Her flat very soon became an inquiry bureau, a court for the settlement of disputes and a rendezvous for the neighbourly-minded. A community Association was founded and activities quickly increased.

Then came the outbreak of war. The flat became a wardens' post with a group of voluntary wardens, all men over the calling-up age, with the addition at a later stage of a few women. They did duty throughout the war and formed a sub-post for the estate staffed entirely by voluntary wardens on duty often seven nights a week. Even during the blitz and the later war years the idea of a community association was kept alive. From the tiny wardens' post in the worker's flat first-aid classes, shoe repairing classes and discussion groups were initiated, and by permission of the L.C.C. the grass between the flats was dug up to make over 100 allotments, thereby greatly increasing the friendliness between neighbours. By the end of the war there was a

strong enough group of people with some idea of service for the Settlement to approach the L.C.C. with a request for accommodation for a community centre. In all these several hundred flats there was not a single room large enough to accommodate even a small gathering of people, but backing on to the estate was a row of houses due for demolition, badly damaged but repairable. By the joint efforts of the Settlement and the L.C.C. a house has been transformed into a cheerful little community centre. On two evenings a week members come in for tea, talk and games, when they can play the piano and sing with freedom from fear of disturbing their neighbours in their thin-walled flats. On other evenings the men can hammer at their shoe repairs under expert guidance, and the women bring their sewing. Small educational activities are springing up. Membership is steadily increasing. The running of the house is in the hands of an elected council and sub-committees. Before the opening of the house another interesting experiment had got thoroughly under way. In a disused shelter a children's library was opened, the books given by friends of the Settlement. The running of the library is now almost entirely in the hands of the children themselves, who appoint captains to give out books to children in their teams. These captains have such a watchful eye for unreturned books that the percentage of loss is so low as not to be credible to the professional librarian. Soon there will be other activities for children whose life in these flats is terribly restricted. The Settlement worker's flat continues to be a rallying-point, and to the devotion of its occupant a large measure of the success of the scheme is due.

Kathleen Bliss

P.S. The pamphlet about the work of the Christian News-Letter and the Christian Frontier Council mentioned in C.N-L. 270 is now ready and can be had on application.

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PLANNERS' PARADISE

In July the New Towns Committee, which has been at work since October, 1945, under the chairmanship of Lord Reith, produced its final report. In the same month the New Towns Bill, giving the necessary powers to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, passed through both Houses of Parliament with scarcely a dissentient vote. About 7½ per cent of the four million people who will be rehoused in the next twenty years will be provided for by new towns. But the whole conception behind the new towns and the means by which they will be built are of far greater social significance than this numerical proportion indicates. Here is an attempt to do something radically new and to do it by means to which we are totally unaccustomed in this country.

"HOUSING" OR "HOUSES"?

There are few bleaker words in common currency than the word "housing". Our forefathers talked of "houses". The development of the industrial revolution lies between the use of that plural and our more common collective noun. We mean by "housing" something which is provided on a large scale for people to live in, and there is a world of subtle difference between the plural noun and the collective. The type of mind which thought in terms of housing rather than of houses produced Becontree and Dagenham and the new suburbs of every great city in Europe.

In the minds of those who thought of new towns there was something more than the desire to improve upon the conception of "housing". The work of the New Towns Committee shows a revolt against the unrecognized assumption that housing is a suitable provision for humans, as stabling is for horses. They are reasserting the idea that the plural of house is "houses" and that the sum of individual houses should be a town, and that a town is not "housing", but is a new organism, something with a distinctive recognizable life of its own.

The word "town" in our language has a very ancient history. It originally meant a piece of land fenced round

by a palisade within which people lived for safety. That element " ourselves against all comers " is still present in the unconscious mind of every person whose life is rooted in a town. Inside the palisade the inhabitants may curse their habitation and call its name mud, but outside the slightest hint of disparaging comment at once evokes defence. Practically every town has some focal point upon which the sentiment of its inhabitants centres. It may belong to the far past, the market cross, the highest spire, the oldest font, Lady Godiva, Dick Turpin, or some ancient example of culinary art still associated with the name of the place. But it may equally be some modern tradition in which this sentiment finds its expression, such as the local football team, the first motor car, a particular cloth or yarn. Coventry has its memorial to the inventor of the bicycle. Nearly every town has its local pride or tradition which it is prepared to defend against all comers. This feeling of place plays a much greater part in the development of true community life and the survival of democracy than is generally recognized.

The attempt to make towns, that is to say to create town communities by deliberate intent, is new, and it is likely to be difficult. Who would be bold enough to claim that all old towns are genuine communities ? Whether new towns fall back into the inorganic conception and become just one more slice of housing with a green belt round it, or whether they become real organic communities depends upon certain matters to which we shall try to direct attention in this Supplement.

THE REPORT SUMMARIZED

It will be useful first to summarize briefly the scheme for the building of new towns laid out in the Final Report of the New Towns Committee. The towns are to be built either in the open countryside or as large extensions of existing small country towns. The centre of the town will be carefully laid out with public buildings, and round it will be grouped five or six neighbourhood units. A neighbourhood unit consists of houses enough for about 10,000 people, together with an appropriate number of shops, small open spaces, churches, schools, hospitals, health centres, cinemas,

inns and cafés. The question of licensed premises is treated in the Report in a manner which indicates that its authors have paid considerable attention to the matter. The Report envisages a large number of places of refreshment, many of which will not have licences, some of which will, and recommends that " no lease should be granted to a house which does not provide food in some form ". The town's industries will be grouped and planned to be accessible to all neighbourhood units, but factories will not be scattered about among the houses. The town will be surrounded by an agricultural green belt, probably owned by the town. The Report contains recommendations on the planning of every kind of public service, and experience has been collected from a wide variety of sources.

What is of most immediate concern is the method of execution of the plan. " The programme " says the Report, " must be executed as a single planned operation ", and the New Towns Act gives all the necessary powers. The Minister of Town and Country Planning, after consulting with the local authorities concerned, may make an order designating an area of land as the site of the proposed new town and may compulsorily acquire the freehold of the land. The Minister will then establish a corporation for the development of the new town on this site. There will be a separate corporation for each town consisting of not more than nine persons including the chairman. They will be paid. The first corporations have already been set up.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CORPORATIONS

The New Towns Act gives to each corporation " power to acquire, hold, manage and dispose of land and other property, to carry out building and other operations, to provide water, electricity, gas, sewerage and other services, to carry on any business or undertaking in or for the purposes of the new town, and generally to do anything necessary or expedient for the purposes of the new town or for purposes incidental thereto ". The only power withheld from a corporation is that of borrowing, on its own initiative, money from the public. The corporation will then act as a planning authority and will appoint the chief executive

officers. The Report suggests that these shall be six in number—the director general, business manager, chief engineer, chief architect, estate management officer and public relations officer, each with a competent staff. The corporations will derive their finance from the Treasury through the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and will be accountable for it to the Ministry. Their task will demand an organizing capacity similar to that which was needed for a major military operation during the war. A town for 50,000 persons will probably cost between £27 and £36 million. It is estimated that when building is at its peak 2,000 houses and a proportionate amount of related buildings, including industrial buildings, will be built each year. An estimated labour force of 5,000 men will have to be housed and maintained. Probably they will themselves occupy some of the first houses they build and become part of the nucleus of the new population. The operation will be complete within fifteen or twenty years. Only at the end of this time, when the corporations have completed their task, will the Minister make an order dissolving and winding up a corporation, and such an order will require approval by both Houses of Parliament.

What does this appointment of corporations mean? It is important that we should see from the beginning just what is happening. Nine men appointed and paid by the central Government will exercise in one area nearly all the powers at present vested in local government. They may consult with local authorities, but they have compulsory powers to sweep away their opposition. They are not democratically elected. There are no voters, ratepayers, or even shareholders to whom they are responsible. Their meetings will not be open to the public. To the inhabitants of the new town as they move in, the corporation will be the Great White Father, the provider and arbiter. The danger is not that these corporations will be inefficient (operation overlord has at least swept away our fancy that we are a nation who can muddle through but cannot plan), but that they may be so efficient that we begin to wonder why on earth we put up with the delays and bunglings which are in some degree an inevitable accompaniment of democratic local government.

For the first time in our history we have the central Government delegating its powers to small groups who act locally and are subject only to remote and indirect control by the electorate.

HOW CAN NEW TOWNS BECOME GENUINE COMMUNITIES ?

The outstanding feature of the final report of the New Towns Committee is its acute awareness that there is a world of difference between building a town and making an integrated community. The failures of many of the major attempts to rehouse town populations in the period between the two wars have been kept well in mind. But the Committee has avoided falling over backward into the opposite error of assuming that housing can be turned into towns by the provision of those much debated buildings or institutions " community centres ". Indeed, they are only mentioned in the Report in a general way, and the Committee is hopeful, perhaps too hopeful, when it suggests that newcomers will " quickly select associates sharing their diverse interests in religion, politics, social welfare, sports and games, study, gardening, and the arts and hobbies ; and the creation from the void of societies and clubs for all these things is an absorbing interest in itself ". Newcomers will in fact be greatly absorbed in getting their own houses arranged and their gardens under control. But in the matter of building up community life, new towns will have one immense initial advantage. Basic and axiomatic to the whole New Towns project is the intention that people who live in new towns shall also work in them. This will cut out that futile soul-destroying waste of time in wearying journeying to and from work, which is so implacable an enemy of the growth of neighbourly activities.

Far more difficult will be the task of stimulating interest and participation in local government. Although the dwellers in new towns will have votes, the councils to which they will be electing representatives have so minute a share in matters that affect their daily lives, that they can hardly be expected to take a lively interest in them. If democracy depends for its survival on the consciences of ordinary men telling them that it is a good principle and ought to be

preserved, then the outlook is dim. Men's desire to come together and do things for themselves is rooted primarily in necessity. What happens when everything is provided, and provided very well, by a corporation which is not only efficient, but has its ear to the ground and knows in advance what people like and is prepared to sustain financial loss on social provisions? Is there not evidence available to show that lavish provision from above makes people grumblers not doers? Will the desire for self-government, a small plant at the best of times though often hardy, survive amid this luscious tropical growth in which theatres, concert halls, libraries, museums, parks, gardens, playing-fields and every provision the heart can wish, is provided without effort or cost by the beneficent providence in Whitehall?

THE CHURCHES IN NEW TOWNS

The Churches are faced with new problems and new opportunities in the new towns. It is clear from the report that the New Towns Committee is aware that the Churches can be looked to for leadership in public service and in the building of genuine community life. Among those who come to the new towns to live there will be a proportion of Christians, but as the population of new towns is likely to be younger than the average in any cross section of the nation it is probably safe to assume that the proportion of committed church members will be smaller than usual. Yet for all this, as the report points out, the great majority of people in this country have a strong though vague feeling that the Christian ethic is, or ought to be, the basis of behaviour between individuals and groups. The Churches are committed as they are everywhere else to a double task in the community. They are concerned to build up their own members into the Christian faith, to make their own congregations into living communities, to bring others into this fellowship and to bear their witness to the outsider. But they also have a concern for and a duty to the town as a whole. From their faith they derive a conception of what human life should be in the ordinary business of living, earning, voting, buying and selling, learning and playing, and it lays upon them a duty to be performed to their fellow

citizens regardless of whether they are within the Christian fold or outside it.

The Churches start work in new towns with very nearly a clean sheet and with certain advantages. If clergy, ministers, lay workers and ordinary Christian lay men and women with a desire to help their fellows come into the new towns in the very early stages, when life is bound to be something of an adventure and men and women will need help and friendship, they will find endless contacts and opportunities to make friends among the people. Probably there will only be one public building for all community activities, from dances and whist drives to concerts and church services. It is not too soon even now for Christian men and women to make up their minds whether perhaps God may call some of them to a new town as a field of Christian witness and service.

But it is also time even now to look ahead and to ask what new pattern of church life we would like to see. It is very difficult to change things in old-established towns. Buildings are there for better or worse, congregations are set in their ways, some of them good, some of them less good, the local population has made up its mind on the Churches in the neighbourhood, the parson finds his week filled up by a steady routine. It would be as foolish to look to new towns as it is to look to the mission field for a relief from all the inhibitions which surround church life, but we could have a great many things other than they are and better than they are.

A SUGGESTED PATTERN OF CHURCH LIFE IN NEW TOWNS

What is needed is to ensure the maximum interpenetration of the life of the Church into the life of the community. The Churches in new towns will receive sites on a non-profit making basis, i.e. at very low rental.[1] They can, therefore, put their money into personnel and buildings. If the Churches make use of community centres and if they plan their work co-operatively they can reduce the heavy burden of outlay upon buildings and upkeep and concentrate on adequate staffing. In new towns the aim can be to achieve a

[1] Because of the unique position of the Church of England, which by law must own the freehold of church buildings, some exception will be made to the otherwise unbroken rule that the freehold of all land will remain in the hand of the corporation.

single Christian community, a Church of the place diverse in manifestation but one in aim, in spirit and as far as possible in working.

The first consideration is that of sites. In each neighbourhood unit of 10,000 people the Churches should have at least four sites. One of these might be large enough to allow for a place of worship, a hall, ancillary rooms, garden and or tennis courts. The remaining sites should be large enough for a single all-purposes building and one or two smaller rooms. The large sites should be at focal centres of the neighbourhood units, the smaller ones should be carefully spaced.

The idea behind such an arrangement is that every small site has enough room for the activities proper to a congregation: its worship, Sunday School, study groups, confirmation classes, committees, parochial council meetings and so on, and small social activities. But there is no reason why these sites should be used as churches. They can be used jointly by the Churches for religious purposes of a different kind: a marriage guidance centre, a religious education centre, a hostel, or for any other religious purpose. The larger sites should be divided among the denominations and act as a focus of the religious life of the neighbourhood, and should provide room for larger social activities undertaken by the Churches.

Co-operative work between the Churches is held up over and over again for lack of staff and central buildings. From the point of view of the corporation of a new town a higher degree of co-operative working between the Churches is a necessity. If the corporations are going to have to consult each denomination separately on matters affecting the life of new towns they will tend to leave them out of it. The argument "The Churches should co-operate to please corporations" is a utilitarian one, but it has its place. The stronger argument is the need of the Churches themselves, in the fulfilment of their purpose, for a higher degree of co-operative working than they have in most places at present. A small building at the town centre with a public bookroom, committee rooms, library and office would be of great value. Interdenominational activities could grow up

and tasks could be done by the Churches jointly which no one of them can do alone if only there were places in which these things could happen and a small office staff to do the work.

Out of the early and necessarily close working of Christians together in the first days of new towns there ought to grow a vigorous interdenominational life, spreading beyond the present relations between clergy and ministers of different denominations to joint working between members of congregations.

The Churches should also bespeak sites in the industrial areas of new towns. If parish boundaries are co-terminous with neighbourhood units, industrial areas may fall outside them, especially if there is intensive grouping of industry. These sites need only be small and may on examination in the light of experience prove to be unnecessary, but until experience has been gained it will be rash to throw away the opportunity of basing factory chaplaincy work on small sites within the industrial areas.

NEED FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

Sites in new towns are already being negotiated between local diocesan interdenominational area committees (set up originally to deal with war damage) and the agencies or corporations responsible for the development of new towns.

One point needs very strong emphasis. These new towns are not just local housing projects. They are an attempt by Parliament, acting on behalf of the nation, to solve a large social problem in a new way. These new towns will be show places attracting visitors and experts not only from this country but from overseas. They are the concern of the whole nation, and equally their religious and social life is the concern of the *whole* Church in the nation. If the Churches merely reproduce the pattern of church life as it is elsewhere and fail to grasp this opportunity imaginatively and together, their failure will not be hidden in a corner. It will be a spectacular failure. For this reason planning of sites in new towns should be a subject on which church leaders take expert advice and then give a substantial lead. This matter is of too great moment to be left to local committees not even specially constituted for the purpose. In one new town where sites

are already negotiated, the Churches have no site at the town centre, and the question of a base for interdenominational work was debated and turned down. Does this reflect the policy of the Churches as a whole in interdenominational co-operation, and if it does not, what action is going to be taken at the centre to ensure a thorough talking out of the matter before sites are fixed in other new towns?

Sites are the immediate question because they are already being fixed and because to some extent they determine the character of the life of the Churches in new towns. But in the work of Christ's Church, people are far more important than buildings. What matters is the impact of Christian men and women and families and of the Christian community as a whole, on the ordinary lives of men and women living in the new towns. Here is a mission field, not only for clergy and trained lay workers, but for Christian teachers, doctors, managers, charge hands and many others. Now is the moment when representatives from the areas from which populations will come and of the area in which new towns will be built should be meeting. The latter have a task which demands superhuman grace. Suddenly to find oneself served with a notice announcing the arrival of a new town on one's doorstep and the possible requisition of home and property, is bound to be unpleasant. For some it may involve real hardship and injustice. Compensation in cash at 1939 value in no way balances the loss of a home, especially to the aged, and ought to be publicly called in question. But for others incorporation in a new town could be an adventure, but only if the people who are going to live and work in new towns establish personal relations and plan their task before the building begins. We need a "Stevenage Fellowship" or a "Three Bridges Society" for bringing these people together.

This is a missionary job. It needs to be undertaken with missionary vigour, prayer and preparation. If we can build in the new towns a more closely integrated Church life, touching the lives of the people and removing from their minds a deeply entrenched suspicion of the Church's motives, there is no knowing where this new experience might spread and take root. K. B.

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